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Facilitating Communication

As our businesses and even our everyday lives become more global, we're getting more sophisticated about diversity. We're more comfortable dealing with differences based on race, nationality, ethnic background, religion, economic background, gender, sexual orientation, and handicaps. But after we strip away these overt differences, we find we still have basic personality differences that need to be understood and dealt with.

The Myers-Briggs research team identified and characterized four major areas of personality preference that may be the key to understanding and valuing the person in the next office who, right now, just drives you crazy.

—Karen Mackey

How often have you felt that the person you were talking to was speaking another language? How often have others seemed bewildered when you described something? We may attribute this to technical jargon or new terminology, but the problem more likely stems from basic communication failure. Since effective communication is essential to a project's success, learning to communicate successfully should be a top priority for anyone in a technical field.

The Myers-Briggs Temperament Indicator (MBTI; Consulting Psychologists Press, Palo Alto, Calif.) can help us understand how natural preferences for gathering information and making decisions shape communication styles. All personalities have value in every organization. Building and maintaining in-

formation systems requires many distinct and specialized skills and roles, and each tends to attract a certain personality. To create a comfortable setting for all personality types, you must foster good communication among them.

A PRIMER ON MBTI

Carl Jung believed human behavior was not random but could be predicted and therefore classified. He developed a model of personality preference based on the idea that everyone was born with a preferred way of using their minds. Katherine Briggs and her daughter Isabel Briggs-Myers, building on Jung's theories, developed the MBTI to help soldiers returning home from WWII identify their inborn preferences and select a suitable occupation. The MBTI focuses on four areas of behavior preferences, using pairs of opposing concepts to identify

1. where people get their energy,
2. how they gather information,
3. how they make decisions, and
4. which work style they prefer.

By applying the MBTI to the interactions, skill sets, and organizational structure of the information technology field, you can find ways to tailor your communication style and create effective communication situations. For more details about the MBTI and a sample questionnaire, see the boxed text "Know Thyself: Identifying Personality Preferences" on page 94.

Filling the well

People get their energy from the outside world of people (Extroverts) or from within themselves

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(Introverts). In your next meeting, identify who breaks the silence first: Introverts are comfortable with long silences, whereas Extroverts tend to talk about anything just to break the silence. Extroverts often think out loud, take the role of speaker, and enjoy being challenged. If Extroverts dominate your meetings, you may need to ask them if they are thinking out loud or expressing a conclusion—and you may need to interrupt them to do so.

While only a quarter of the general population are Introverts, most technologists fall into this category. Meetings tend to drain Introverts, who prefer to read and think about something before asking questions; they like to present finished ideas. In meetings, when presenting them with new information, give them time to process it, and never interrupt while they are making a point.

The differences between Introverted and Extroverted communication styles can create friction. An Introvert may feel an Extrovert is waffling when, in fact, he is simply processing a decision verbally. The Extrovert may feel the Introvert is withholding information when she is just processing internally.

Gathering information

People gather information linearly (Sensors) or abstractly (iNtuitives). This tends to create the biggest communication barrier. The iNtuitive tends to speak in concepts and global futuristic ideas, and view facts as contributors to concepts and ideas. A Sensor tends to take things literally, prefers tangible results, and speaks plainly, describing concrete facts sequentially in minute detail. The Sensor may see the iNtuitive as absent-minded and out of touch with reality, whereas the iNtuitive may get impatient with all the details the Sensor gives. Information technologists fall about equally into both categories, but different roles attract one preference over the other.

Misunderstandings can arise if a Sensor feels the iNtuitive is changing the subject when the iNtuitive is, in fact, generating possibilities. The Sensor needs to understand how, not why, something is accomplished, beginning with the first step. An iNtuitive, on the other hand, may see a Sensor as unimaginative when the Sensor is trying to be realistic about practical matters. An iNtuitive must grasp the overall concept to understand the details.

Making decisions

People make decisions based on objective information (Thinkers) or subjective information (Feelers). Thinkers tend to be logical, critical, and orderly; they prefer to work with facts. Feelers are more driven by personal values; because they tend to be more people-oriented, they are good team-builders and sellers. Technologists tend to fall in the Thinker category.

Learning to communicate effectively should be a top priority for anyone in a technical field.

If you are a Thinker, a Feeler may see you as harsh and cold when you take a detached problem-solving viewpoint. To avert this, mention points of agreement before differences. Recognize that feelings can be both cause and effect, and do not dismiss the importance of subjective thinking. Remember, politics are subjective.

If you are a Feeler, a Thinker may see you as over-personalizing when you are really focusing on implications for individuals. Since many technologists assume the end user understands and uses computers, discuss the impact of the Thinker's recommendations on the application's eventual user. Have the Thinker visit the end-user site.

Defining a work style

Different work styles can cause the most stress in any project. Judgers prefer closure, detailed schedules, and organization. They want things decided and concluded—a bad decision is better than no decision. Perceivers prefer to be spontaneous and to leave things open: a decision made too early will close the door on a better opportunity just around the corner. Judgers seek to avoid last-minute stresses, which actually energize Perceivers to meet deadlines.

Since a Judger may see a Perceiver as lazy or procrastinating, the Perceiver should express her wish to keep outstanding questions open-ended until a specified time. A Perceiver may view a Judger as rigid and controlling when he is simply trying to structure and schedule. When a Judger sets a deadline or a plan of action for deliverables, he should inform the Perceiver. Perceivers do not miss deadlines, but need to reach them in their own way.

KNOW THYSELF: IDENTIFYING PERSONALITY STYLES

In any communication situation, you must first understand your own stance. If you then take the time to understand others' preferences, you will know when you need to alter your communication style, and how.

GETTING STARTED

Defining preferences does not mean pigeon-holing people, and the results have nothing to do with intelligence, drive, or ambition. It simply guides us in determining a person's preferred communication stance. To understand this point, try this exercise.

First, write "Communication Success" with your dominant hand. Now switch hands and write "Communication Success" again. You will find this more difficult, and it may be hard to read, but with practice it may get easier. This exercise shows us two things. First, while you may prefer to write with a particular hand, you could learn to write with the other, if needed. The same applies to personality type: you may prefer to do things one way but could learn another way if the situation called for it. Second, your handwriting differs from that of someone else who writes with the same hand. Likewise, people with similar behavioral preferences are nonetheless unique individuals.

FINDING YOUR PREFERENCES

It is best to take the official questionnaire from a qualified MBTI person. However, the following exercise will give you a general idea in determining your preference in each category; you can then apply this to others in your workgroup, if desired. The four preference lists in Table A present common words or phrases that represent psychological opposites; these will help you determine your behavioral preferences. As you complete this exercise, also think about your current project team, manager, company, and business liaisons.

The first pair of columns focuses on where you get your energy. Circle one item in each dyad that best expresses your preference—for example, camaraderie or solitude. Select what seems most comfortable, not what you think should be your style. Count the items circled on each side to get a sense of your preference—in this case, Extroversion versus Introversion.

The second pair of columns presents information-gathering preferences. The third pair gives insight on your decision-making stance. The fourth pair helps you understand your preferred work style. Complete these as above.

Table A
Preference Lists

Energy Sources		Gathering Information		Making Decisions		Work Style	
Extrovert	Introvert	Sensor	iNtuitive	Thinker	Feeler	Judger	Perceiver
Camaraderie	Solitude	Experience	Hunches	Objective	Subjective	Settled	Pending
Sociable	Territorial	Past	Future	Principles	Values	Decided	Open
Interactive	Private	Realistic	Conceptual	Policy	Society	Fixed	Flexible
Gregarious	Reflective	Perspiration	Inspiration	Laws	Circumstances	Plan ahead	Adapt as you go
External	Internal	Actual	Possible	Detached	Involved	Closure	Options
Breadth	Depth	Specific	General	Clarity	Harmony	Decisions	Opportunities
Extensive	Intensive	Down to earth	Head in clouds	Firmness	Persuasion	Planned	Spontaneous
Relationships	Deep friendships	Sequential	Random	Impersonal	Personal	Control	Adapt
Expand	Conserve	Fact	Fantasy	Standards	Good or bad	Completed	Emergent
Actions	Reactions	Practicality	Ingenuity	Critique	Appreciate	Definite	Tentative
External events	Internal reactions	Sensible	Imaginative	Analyze	Sympathize	Urgency	Excitement
				Practicality	Beauty	Structured	Unstructured

These sources provide more information on MBTI:

- ◆ For a description of MBTI, see <http://keirse.com/cgi-bin/keirse/kcs.cgi>.
- ◆ For a link to the above test and more description, see <http://www.enteract.com/~jwalz/Jung/mbti.html>.

To obtain the official questionnaire, contact any of the following:

- ◆ Center for Application of Psychological Type: In the US, call 1-800-777-2278.
- ◆ Type Reporter: In the US, call 1-800-626-7180.
- ◆ Type Resources: In the US, call 1-800-456-6284.

TEMPERAMENT: COMBINING THE PREFERENCES

Combining these four preference profiles gives us 16 personality types. David Kiersey and Marilyn Bates viewed people's behavior as patterned wholes, a theory developed simultaneously but independently of the MBTI to define four prevailing temperaments. However, it correlates to MBTI in the following manner:

1. Guardian: combines Sensor, Judger traits (SJ)
2. Artisan: combines Sensor, Perceiver traits (SP)
3. Rational: combines iNtuitive, Thinker traits (NT)
4. Idealist: combines iNtuitive, Feeler traits (NF)

The Guardian

The Guardian temperament combines the Sensor's needs for reality and detail with the Judger's desire for coming to closure. These people are the traditionalists who seek to conform to and perpetuate what is. They tend to value the presence of order, lawfulness, security, propriety, and contracts.

When conversing with a Guardian, keep in mind that they are very responsible and respect authority chains. They tend to do what is expected of them. Since they tend to want things to remain the same, it's best to have details ready along with some managerial support when requesting innovative approaches.

The Artisan

Artisans combine a Sensor's strong sense of reality and attention to detail with a Perceiver's spontaneity. They tend to be excellent troubleshooters, easily making quick decisions among an array of options. When all else fails, they read the directions. When dealing with an Artisan, describe your issue as a problem that needs to be solved technically. They could be masters of tools and instruments that can help the group achieve requirements with new technology.

The Rationalist

Rationalists make great theorists, being both objective (Thinker) and visionary (iNtuitive). They constantly seek competence and excellence, and are often eager innovators. Rationalists tend to believe that change for its own sake produces learning, even if they learned they should not have changed. To best work with a Rationalist, make sure she implements what you want implemented and not what she feels is right. If she dismisses a proposal, ask what she dislikes about it—she may be discounting a total solution when she simply disagrees with or doesn't understand one small piece of it.

The Idealist

Idealists seek to grow and to guide others. They have a strong sense of ethics and values, and see life as a process of cultivating relationships and developing their own and others' potential (iNtuitive). They value authenticity and integrity in people, relationships, and organizations, and tend to bring out the best in people.

When describing something to an Idealist, discuss its benefits (tangible and intangible) to people and the organization. The Idealist will help you promote the idea if he believes in it, and will give credit where credit is due.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY TYPES AND TEMPERAMENTS

Just as individuals have preferences, so do departments and organizations. Marketing attracts Extroverted iNtuitives; accounting attracts Introverted Sensors, as do many information technology specialties. While anyone can learn new ways to work and communicate, people have inborn preferences and dominant traits. To learn how to identify and work with these, try the following:

While anyone can learn new ways, people have inborn preferences and dominant traits.

1. Define what a particular task, role, function, or skill requires.
2. Prioritize the list.
3. Identify the preference or temperament type best suited to the task.
4. Identify the MBTI dominant trait.

Table 1 (on the next page) shows the results of applying these steps to specific IT departments. This list associates each department with a probable MBTI preference and temperament. While this is simply a guide, it can help you identify the different communication stances you may encounter among IT professionals.

Surveys done by "type" researchers (Carol Hildebrand, "I'm OK, You're Really Weird," *CIO Magazine*, Oct. 1995, pp. 86-96) show that the top two IT personality types are ISTJ (Introverted, Sensor, Thinker, Judger) and INTJ (Introverted, iNtuitive, Thinker, Judger). Both types prefer schedules and closure. Both make objective decisions that might inadvertently bypass end-user needs; their internal focus makes it difficult to identify with others' needs and views. They may also find it difficult to work well in teams or initiate conversations. Guardians (Sensor/Judgers) will do as they are told, whereas



Culture at Work

Table 1
IT Department Profiles

IT Department	Predominant Preference	Predominant Temperament
Application support: Systems engineering	iNtuitive	Rational
Application support: Quality control	Sensing	Artisan
Business-specific application: Development	Thinking	Rational/Guardian
Business-specific application: Maintenance	Sensing	Artisan
Business-specific application: Decision Support	iNtuitive	Rational
Telecommunications: Network planning	Sensing	Guardian
Telecommunications: Network implementation	Sensing	Artisan
System operations: Hardware/software support	Sensing	Guardian
System operations: Help desk	iNtuitive	Idealist
Training: Formal training	iNtuitive	Idealist
Training: User documentation	iNtuitive	Idealist

Rationalists (iNtuitive/Thinkers) believe they are right and have a tougher time understanding other perspectives.

People gravitate to departments and organizations that best suit their personality preference. Therefore, carrying the “type” theory a bit further, organizations and departments may follow the trends suggested above. ISTJ departments and organizations resist rapid change and are uncomfortable taking chances; they could miss opportunities for improvement. They are most receptive to new ideas if you stress their logic and good sense in tangible terms. Since such a department or organization values credentials and experience, you may need to back up your proposal with hard facts, similar experiences, and organizational clout.

An INTJ department or organization is more future-oriented. You’ll need to describe your ideas on an intellectual or scientific level; point out the inefficiencies in the current process and how the proposed changes will remedy them. Keep in mind, however, that this type of organization tends to be pragmatic and may want proof that something will work. They will likely understand the opportunities but may lose interest in the details of planning and delivering products.

REMEMBER, WE’RE DEALING WITH PEOPLE HERE

Amid the turmoil of developing and implementing new technology, people and departments can find ways to communicate effectively. The approaches described here can turn the many differences among people and groups into powerful tools instead of divisive intrusions. The people working for and with you have good intentions. Understanding them and putting them to work productively supports positive communication and thus increases the chances your projects—and your people—will succeed. ❖

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